

# Casting the other as an existential threat

Darwich, May

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## **Casting the Other as an Existential Threat**

### **The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis**

**May Darwich**

*Lecturer, Durham University*

E-mail: may.darwich@durham.ac.uk

**Tamirace Fakhoury**

*Assistant Professor, Lebanese American University*

E-mail: tamirace.fakhoury@lau.edu.lb

#### **Abstract**

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Sunni–Shiite divide came back to the fore in regional politics. In this context, sectarian identities have now acquired a security dimension, as actors have started framing each other as existential threats. This article aims to examine the process by which sectarian identities become security issues and sources of conflict. We claim that primordial and instrumentalist/rationalist approaches to identity cannot capture the complexities of sectarianism in Middle East international relations. Instead, we draw on securitisation theory to examine the speech acts and narratives leading to the construction of sectarianism as a security issue in the Middle East. We examine Hezbollah's and Saudi Arabia's speech acts towards the Syria crisis as revelatory cases in the securitisation of the Sunni–Shiite divide in the post-2011 order.

**Keywords:** sectarianism, securitisation, identity, Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah

## **1. Introduction**

In the 2014 Global Attitudes survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, people from the Middle East cited ‘religious and ethnic hatred’ as the most important global threat (Pew Research Center 2014). Indeed, four years after the onset of the Arab uprisings, both Arab media and scholarly debates seem to have shifted significantly from the rhetoric of democratisation and social justice. Instead, sectarianism<sup>1</sup> and the accompanying high potential for violence have emerged as the dominant features of the post-2011 regional order (Hurd 2015; R. Khoury 2011; Venkat 2014; Bowen 2013). Since the outbreak of the Syrian armed conflict and its spillovers, scholars have focused on sectarian identities, and particularly the Sunni–Shiite divide, as a driver of conflict (Abdo 2013a; Al-Rasheed 2011; Peri 2014b). Rivalries, alliances, conflicts, and wars are increasingly framed in sectarian terms. This article examines the eruption of sectarianism in regional politics. It examines the process through which sectarian identities have emerged as security issues and a source of conflict.

While there is consensus that sectarianism takes centre stage in regional dynamics, there is significant disagreement on how to examine the role of sectarianism in regional conflicts. On the one hand, primordial approaches presume that sectarian identities, assumed to be natural, are the main driver of conflict. They consider primordial loyalties — such as sect and ethnicity — to be endemic, and the ensuing conflicts inevitable. On the other hand, the instrumental approach emphasizes the role of power politics, alliances, and material structures. It explains conflicts as being driven by regional rivalries and the exigencies of balance-of-power dynamics, viewing sectarian identities as tools open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites. The existing literature, which is divided between explanations of sectarianism as a given and accounts relying on structural factors, has proven limited in accounting for the mechanisms through which identities emerge as security issues in some cases and not others.

Inspired by securitisation theory, this article adopts a post-structuralist approach to examine how sectarian identities emerge as security threats. Securitisation theory is centred

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<sup>1</sup> In the Middle East, scholars draw on the concept of sectarianism as both a descriptive and analytical category to describe how religious cleavages politicize and become markers of conflict.

around the idea that security is constructed as a speech act, with threats brought into existence because they are uttered as such by securitising actors — for example, the state or political elites. By portraying a sectarian Other as the source of an existential threat to a particular society, elites move the issue from normal politics to the ‘exceptional’, with extraordinary measures required to counter the source of the threat. Examining the role of sectarianism in regional conflicts involves examining how political elites use sectarian discourses as powerful sources of legitimation. However, sectarian discourses are not merely manipulation or rhetoric; elites construct security issues by reiterating that certain sectarian identities are the source of existential threats. Instead of focusing on religious differences or the power-politics motives driving actors in conflict, securitisation theory focuses on how sectarian narratives are produced and reproduced while being tied to conflictual relations.

An emerging trend within securitisation theory has highlighted the fruitfulness of applying securitisation theory to the study of sectarianism in the Middle East (Malmvig 2015). This article builds on this approach and examines how sectarian identities — namely, the Sunni-Shiite divide — have emerged as security threats in the Syria crisis. Initially, the Syria crisis was hardly sectarian in nature. Through sectarian discourses and practices, regional and domestic actors portrayed the existence of communities in accordance with sectarian identities. Sectarian narratives are no longer instruments of political legitimation; these narratives are employed to create a heightened sense of insecurity and are associated with the use of extraordinary military means. In this vein, this article examines the discourses and practices of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia pertaining to their involvement in the Syria crisis. We show how both actors have constructed the ‘sectarian other’ as an existential threat. We also examine how these acts have been internalized by the masses and have facilitated the use of extraordinary politics.

Various factors have motivated our case study selection. Both Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia have been central actors in contending axes — that is, the resistance axis and the so-called Sunni bloc. This selection, thus, demonstrates that securitisation processes cut across different sectarian camps. Examining Saudi Arabia’s and Hezbollah’s discourses in the context of the Syria crisis shows how actors have created discourses that prompted their societies to believe that they were threatened by the mere existence of the ‘Other’ sect. Although the Syria

crisis was hardly sectarian in nature at the outset, securitised discourses have inextricably linked conflictual relations to sectarian narratives. Furthermore, the examination of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia advances an understanding of how both state and non-state actors have been implicated in the process of framing the sectarian Other as a threat. The aim here is not to compare Saudi Arabia's politics of securitisation with that of Hezbollah.. Rather it is to track how securitising sectarianism articulates itself in a variety of contextual settings. Whereas Saudi Arabia, a regional power, has capitalized on the Sunni–Shiite divide to legitimize its intervention, Hezbollah, which treads more carefully within Lebanon's power-sharing setting, has used different sectarian nuances and overtones. More precisely, it has taken care to differentiate between Sunnis and Takfiris because it has had to argue its case within Lebanon's divided society. By drawing on a language that couples sectarian rhetoric with existential threats, the party has, however, positioned itself within the politics of sectarianism that Syria's conflict has heightened (Berti and Paris, 2014, 30).

In addition, an inquiry into these two cases seeks to emancipate the study of sectarianism from those strands of the literature that focus on divided societies. Scholars have thoroughly studied sectarianism as an offshoot of heterogeneous societies. Such literature no longer captures the post-2011 dynamics in the Middle East which has witnessed the rise of 'regional sectarianism' (Philipps, 2014, 151). Quasi-homogeneous states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt have endorsed sectarian practices and discourses (Monier 2015). Furthermore, non-state actors have had to position themselves vis-à-vis the regional wave of sectarianism. Accordingly, sectarianism is not necessarily a sociocultural phenomenon endemic to multisectarian societies. Examining the cases of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia provides insights into how securitisation has influenced the emergence and consolidation of sectarianism at both domestic and regional levels in Middle East politics. It also traces post-2011 'securitised sectarianism' as a contextualized notion and practice,<sup>2</sup> embedded in specific constellations and inflections of power.

The article is structured as follows. First, we examine the existing literature on sectarianism in Middle Eastern international relations. We then present the main elements of

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of contextualising the politics of securitisation, see Stritzel (2011).

securitisation as a framework of analysis. Securitising sectarianism, we argue, starts as an explicit political decision whereby the political actor frames the external other as a menace through a repertoire of discursive and political practices. In this repertoire, domestic and regional security imperatives are closely interlinked. We draw on Saudi Arabia's and Hezbollah's interventions in the Syria crisis as revelatory cases. Afterwards, we discuss the broader theoretical implications of applying securitisation to the study of sectarianism in the Middle East.

## **2. Sectarianism in the Middle East: Primordialism versus Materialism**

Sectarianism is an undeniable element of Middle East politics. Still, there is no scholarly agreement on how to approach it within regional conflicts. Scholars have conventionally framed sectarianism through the prism of intra-religious dynamics within divided societies (Dynes 1957). In these societies, beliefs about religious differences evolve into boundary and conflict markers in politics' social stratification (Brewer 1992). In the Middle East, sectarianism has been studied as a typical phenomenon of divided societies — such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain (Wehrey 2013; Matthiesen 2013b; Gengler 2013; Pinto 2014; Salamey 2009; Makdisi 1996; Amail 1985).

Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, sectarianism has, however, emerged as a regional phenomenon that extends beyond divided societies. Sectarian identities at the regional level have been situated within the debates between primordialists (essentialists) and rationalists. The primordial approach emphasizes culture and identity as the determinants of conflict and cooperation among actors. The explosion of ethnic conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia led some scholars to draw correlations between communal and ethnic identities, on the one hand, and enmity and conflict, on the other (Horowitz 1995; Saideman 2001). In the Middle East, primordialists have analysed Sunni-Shiite identities as the core conflict dominating the region since the seventh century and still pertaining to current political dynamics (Nasr 2006; Betts 2013; Abdo 2013a). Inspired by Huntington's (1993; 1996) famous argument about the clash of civilizations, according to which conflicts would erupt around cultural divides, some scholars argue that the 'clash' is within Islam (Sadiki 2014).

However, this approach fails to explain why sectarian identities remain peaceful at particular moments and become a source of conflict at others.

Rationalists have adopted an instrumentalist top-down approach, which derives from neorealism and Marxist structuralism in international relations theory. As the structure is constituted of the relative power distribution, identities are merely instruments manipulated to legitimize actors' material interests (e.g. Walt 1987; Kedourie 1992). From this perspective, sectarian identities have emerged in regional politics as a prop of power in the region (Gause 2007; Wehrey et al. 2009; Lynch 2013; Gause 2014; Zubaida 2014; Berti and Paris 2014; Wehrey 2013). Some scholars argue that regional actors have used sectarian discourses to legitimize their regimes in the face of the Arab uprisings (Al-Rasheed 2011; Guzansky and Berti 2013; Matthiesen 2013b). Nevertheless, this top-down approach leaves many questions unanswered. It reduces identity dynamics to superstructures, and agency has a minimal influence on behaviour. This approach also does not explain the rise of sectarian identities among the pool of other identities available to political leaders, such as ethnic and tribal identities. In the remainder of this article, we revisit securitisation theory as a theoretical entry point for the study of sectarianism in the Middle East. We then apply securitisation as a theoretical lens with which to examine sectarian discourses and practices at the regional level in the context of the Syria crisis.

### **3. Securitisation: A Framework of Analysis**

In the course of the 1990s, the realist strategies dominant in security studies were challenged by theoretical innovations that 'sociologized' the concept of security and took critical stances against the objective realities of world politics. Emerging from different methodological and ontological perspectives, these approaches offered reflective and dynamic debates on how to understand 'security'. One of the most important and controversial contributions to this debate was the idea of 'securitisation', a term advanced and developed by the Copenhagen School in IR. The concept of 'securitisation' points to the process by which issues are transformed into security issues. The Copenhagen School considers security to be a constructed social

phenomenon. Societies' sense of insecurity increases when their identities are perceived to be endangered.

Seen from this perspective, identities, including sectarian ones, can be a powerful tool with which to mobilize people or gain legitimacy. Therefore, actors politicize identities and portray these as facing an existential threat. This process of securitisation conforms to a broad constructivist approach, according to which security is a discursive construction rather than an objective reality. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003, 491) define securitisation as a successful 'speech act' 'through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat'. In other words, in order for an issue to be *securitised*, an actor, or the *securitiser*, presents and frames it as an existential threat, requiring the suspension of normal politics. Accordingly, the securitising act is 'not simply a realm of instrumental rationality and rhetorical manipulation' (Williams, 2003: 522), but obligates and enables a subsequent behaviour to handle the securitised threat. In other words, it is an 'authoritative' discourse that mobilise a society in facing an existential threat. For securitisation to be attained, this '*securitising move*' needs to be accepted by the '*audience*' (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998; Wæver 1995). In other words, the securitisation process is an intersubjective process that requires an interaction between the securitiser and the audience. Securitisation can be clarified by highlighting its three characteristics: securitisation is (1) a speech act that (2) presents a strategic act and is (3) accepted by the audience.

Securitisation starts as a conscious, explicit political act or 'speech act' that leaders undertake to make an issue into a security situation by representing it as such. As Wæver (1995, 55) states,

What then *is* security? With the help of language theory, we can regard 'security' as a *speech act*. In this usage, security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance *itself* is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship). By uttering 'security' a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.



Waeber (1995, 54) adds that ‘something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so’. In other words, securitisation is a political choice, a decision to conceptualize an issue in a particular way. There may be various reasons and motivations for framing an issue in security terms, such as political survival or the overcoming of an identity crisis. The Copenhagen School also limits the use of securitisation; it is limited to the constant repetition of a specific ‘rhetoric of existential threat’. As Buzan et al. (1998, 26) argue,

The distinguishing feature of securitisation is a specific rhetorical structure [...] That quality is the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as *security* an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means. For the analyst to grasp this act, the task is not to assess some objective threats that ‘really’ endanger some object to be defended or secured; rather, it is to understand the processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat.

Framing an issue as an existential threat also involves a second dimension, which relates to the policies adopted to handle the securitised threat. The securitising act is not limited to rhetorical manipulation; it also enables a subsequent behaviour to address the threat (Sjöstedt 2008, 10). By framing an issue as an existential threat, political actors give it a sense of urgency that helps create sustained political support and enables the deployment of resources. Such measures might not be possible if these issues were regarded as matters of ‘normal politics’. A securitiser not only urges that ‘extraordinary measures’ be taken, but also more or less disregards all institutionalized rules of conduct. However, the speech act or the framing of an issue as an existential threat is not a sufficient condition for the success of securitisation. The third dimension in this process is the audience’s acceptance of these acts. As Buzan et al. (1998, 31) claim, ‘whether an issue is a security issue is not something [securitisers] decide alone’.

Considering the above three dimensions, one can conclude that securitisation is an explicit speech act undertaken to securitise an issue by framing it as an existential threat. This securitising move is accompanied by strategies or measures to face this constructed threat. This securitising move cannot be successful unless it is accepted and approved by the audience – or, in other words, unless this subjective threat becomes intersubjective. We exemplify this

framework through our examination of the cases of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia and the securitisation of sectarian discourses in the Syrian armed conflict.

#### **4. Saudi Arabia**

In March 2011, the al-Assad regime started to crack down on the Syrian uprisings. After six months of violence, King Abdullah condemned the Syrian regime and urged al-Assad ‘to stop the killing machine’ (Dehghanpisheh 2011). Although Saudi official statement spotlighted the massacres and the violence committed by the regime to mobilize Saudi public opinion behind Saudi foreign policy to overthrow the al-Assad regime, it ambiguously employed a dichotomous sectarian language to gain further support for Saudi policies in the Syria crisis. Through its media empire, the Kingdom portrayed the al-Assad regime as targeting and oppressing Sunni groups. This section unravels the process through which the Shiite Other was indirectly securitised in Saudi speech acts in the context of the Syria crisis. To unpack the different elements of this securitisation process, we first explore the drivers behind this discourse. Whereas material considerations have shaped Saudi foreign policy in Syria, the Kingdom has indirectly employed discourses demarcating Sunnis and Shiites to garner support for its policies. As the Kingdom invoked that violence and massacres have been targeted at Sunni population in Syria, the Shiite Other emerged as an existential threat to Sunni communities across the Arab world. This discourse unleashed a defensive securitization of faith among Sunni scholars and Saudi public. By tying its involvement in the Syria crisis to such defensive sectarian narrative, the Saudi Kingdom has constructed a shared understanding that Shiism is a threat.

This section examines the securitisation process, analysing the Saudi sectarian discourse and its internalisation by the elite and the public. The Saudi Kingdom has widely used its media organisations, namely the TV channel *Al-Arabiya* and newspapers such as *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, to cover the conflict in a way that tilted heavily in favour of the rebels. Saudi media portrayed the rebel groups as victims of sectarian atrocities and massacres while downplaying their extremism. These narratives contributed to heightened defensive feeling and victimization of Sunnis among Saudis elites and public, who instigated enormous quantity of money flowing to rebel groups in Syria (McAnts 2013).

This securitisation of the Sunni–Shiite divide in Saudi foreign policy was not driven by the dictates of Sunni identity of the Kingdom. It was a conscious, explicit decision to change the dynamics of the regional alliances. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and the subsequent formation of the Syrian–Iranian alliance, the relationship between the Saudi Kingdom and the al-Assad regime had hardly been friendly (Sunayama 2007, 89–138). Saudi Arabia had constantly attempted to break down the ‘resistance camp’ — Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas — while attracting Syria into the fold of the so-called ‘moderate camp’ — Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. Despite various Saudi strategies of isolation and containment towards Syria, the Kingdom was not able to disrupt the Syrian–Iranian alliance. A confrontation occurred between al-Assad and the Al Saud following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister and Saudi protégé Rafik al-Harriri in 2005 and again during the 2006 Lebanon War. The Kingdom accused Hezbollah and its ally Syria of endangering the stability of the region and harming ‘Arab interests’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Saudi official statements accused Syria of destabilising Lebanon by using it as a stage for its proxy war against Israel. In response, al-Assad mobilized the Arab masses against their regimes by calling the leaders of the moderate camps ‘half-men’ with ‘half-positions’.<sup>4</sup> When confrontation proved to be unsuccessful in driving a wedge between Damascus and Teheran, Saudi Arabia moved to engage with the Syrian regime. From 2008 through 2011, the reconciliation between Syria and Saudi Arabia became particularly visible, especially in the aftermath of Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (December 2008–January 2009). This reconciliation culminated in King Abdullah’s trip to Damascus in October 2009 (Black 2009).

The Saudi Kingdom has often perceived the Syria–Iran–Hezbollah axis, or the so-called ‘resistance axis’, as a threat. This threat perception has been driven by the Kingdom’s constant rivalry with Iran, which has involved ideological contestations and competing geopolitical interests (Wehrey et al. 2009). Scholars are often divided on the sources of this threat perception. Some argue that the Saudi–Iranian competition is ideational (Rubin 2014; Mabon 2013; Adib-Moghaddam 2006). Others claim that identities are only instruments masking geopolitical rivalry over influence in the region, especially in the Gulf, Lebanon, and Iraq (Gause 2009). In this

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<sup>3</sup> The full text of the Saudi statement can be found at <http://www.spa.gov.sa/English/details.php?id=375383>

<sup>4</sup> For the full speech, see Al-Assad (2006).

context, the Saudis have long attempted to isolate Iran from its allies (Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas). With the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings and the subsequent transformation of the unrest into civil war, the Saudi Kingdom saw an opportunity to finally break down this axis. Moreover, it believed that weakening or toppling the al-Assad regime would undermine the popular appeal of the ‘resistance axis’. As a Saudi official stated, ‘Syria is Iran’s entry into the Arab world [...] take down al-Assad and you inflict a strategic blow on Iran’ (quoted in K. Sullivan 2012).

In 2011, the opportunity to change the balance of power unleashed sectarian ferment. Whether the threat of the ‘resistance axis’ was real or imagined, sectarian identities emerged as inextricably related to security. The Saudi Kingdom portrayed the al-Assad regime as an existential threat that allowed Shiite encroachment in the region. Before 2011 and despite unsuccessful Saudi efforts to peel Syria away from Iran, the Syrian regime had never been identified as an enemy or a threat in Saudi narratives, but rather as a mere Arab rival, with which the Kingdom still shared interests in Lebanon and the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat* 2009). This discourse underwent a significant change following the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings. In the Saudi narrative, the Syrian regime shifted from being a mere rival to an enemy endangering and targeting Sunni groups in Syria. Based on this discourse, the Kingdom undertook an active role in the Syria crisis, offering financial support, arms, and training to rebel groups with a Sunni background (BBC 2013; Schanzer 2012; Wezeman 2013; Kenner 2013; Pierret 2013).

Sectarian discourses are not entirely novel in Saudi Arabia (Shakdam 2014). In the 1980s, the most important period of sectarian bitterness, the Kingdom actively used the Sunni-Shiite divide to counter the revolutionary message of Ayatollah Khomeini (Al-Labad 2014). However, with the exception of this period, Saudi officials have not consistently manipulated sectarian hostilities (Jones 2008). Gause (2007) argues for similar inconsistency in Saudi policy, noting that ‘the Saudi government itself has not played the sectarian card in recent crises’. Instead, the Kingdom has framed sectarianism as a form of ‘cynical manipulation’ and associated it with ‘playing with fire’. Although there has been no official sectarian discourse, the regime has tacitly endorsed it. For instance, it has done little to counter anti-Shiite fatwas issued by Salafi clerics

(Wehrey et al. 2009, 27). As Jones (2007) claims, ‘managing and strategically deploying anti-Shiism is [...] an important part of [King Abdullah’s] government political calculus’. Toward the end of 2011, the Saudis framed the Syria crisis as synonymous to the encroachment of the ‘Shiite crescent’, which was said to constitute an existential threat to Sunni Islam. Media outlets and clerics with clear affiliation to the Kingdom constantly blamed the al-Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran for continued massacres ‘to exterminate Sunnis’, which has pushed for sectarian retribution from Sunni scholars and Saudi public (BBC News 2013). Furthermore, Saudi media have constantly cast blame on Iran for embracing sectarian narratives and pursuing sectarian policies in Syria, which instigated defensive Sunni feelings in Saudi Arabia and across the Arab world.

Although Saudi official statements abstained from using sectarian language, Saudi state-owned media and religious scholars promoted a sectarian discourse. Newspapers, such as *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and state-owned satellite channels, such as *Al-Arabiya*, played an influential role in spreading and promoting this discourse not only in Saudi Arabia, or the Gulf, but also across the Arab world. For example, Abdel Rahman Al-Rashed (2014), ex-editor-in-chief of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and ex-director of *Al-Arabiya*, argued that, whatever its excesses and atrocities, the Islamic State has the virtue of being a Sunni buffer against an expanding Shiite crescent. Similarly, another Saudi journalist for *Al-Arabiya* wrote that the Islamic State, despite its extremism, is the only actor that can save the region from the al-Assad regime (Khashqagi 2014).

More important is the influence of Sunni religious scholars indulging in the anti-Shiite sectarian discourse. The Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia can be classified according to two groups. The first group comprises scholars officially belonging to the Wahhabi tradition. These are the clerics on the Council of Senior Ulama and the Ulama in the judiciary, the religious police, and other state institutions. The second group consists of scholars involved in the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening) movement. Al-Sahwa is a group heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and blended with the Wahhabi tradition. Although the second group was critical of the Saudi response to the Arab uprisings, both groups have supported Saudi involvement against al-Assad and promoted Saudi sectarian discourses (Matthiesen 2015).

Islamic scholars have used a Takfir strategy, denouncing others as non-believers, to discredit, demonize, and criminalize the Shiite community across the region. Shaykh Nasir al-Umar,<sup>5</sup> ex-member of the Council of Senior Ulama, for example, accused the ‘Shiites’ or the ‘*rafidah*’ (rejectors) in Bahrain, Syrian, and Iran, of being the source of ‘corruption and destruction among Sunnis’ (Al-Umar 2012). Beyond this discourse on the part of prominent conservative clerics, Twitter and Facebook have constituted additional venues where less prominent, yet still influential, clerics have posted anti-Shiite fatwas. Saad al-Durihim, a Saudi cleric, posted a series of comments on Twitter<sup>6</sup> apostatising the Shiite in Syria and Iraq and stating that jihadi fighters should ‘kill the *rawafid*’<sup>7</sup>(Mouzahem 2013).<sup>8</sup>

In this context, a number of Saudi clerics praised the death of Shiite leaders and members of Hezbollah in an Israeli airstrike on the Golan Heights on 18 January 2015. Mohammed al-Barrak, a member of the Muslim Scholars Association in Saudi Arabia, tweeted the following: ‘When the Shiites die at the hands of the Jews we thank God that he answered our prayers’. He also claimed that ‘the damage inflicted by the Shiites on the Muslims is more than that inflicted by the Jews’ (Mamouri 2015). Another example is provided by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric who disagreed with the Saudi ulama on political issues, especially their stance on the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah. With the outbreak of violence in Syria, Al-Qaradawi changed his position and criticized Hezbollah, calling it ‘the party of the Devil’. He stated that ‘the Syrian uprisings unravelled Hezbollah’s real Shiite face’. He expressed regrets for his previous animosity towards prominent Saudi clerics, and he also acknowledged that they had been correct in describing Hezbollah as a Shiite threat to the region. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh, thanked al-Qaradawi for his position, adding ‘We have followed the statement of our brother al-Qaradawi concerning his comments on the aggression of the so-called “Party of God” and its cooperation with the Syrian regime against the Syrian

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<sup>5</sup> Shaykh Nasir al-Umar was among the clerics who forbid supporting Hezbollah in its war against Israel in 2006 due to its Shiite background. He described it as ‘the party of the devil’ (Fattah 2006).

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/Saldurihim>

<sup>7</sup> *Rawafid* or *rafida* is a term used by Wahabbi clerics to describe the Shiites.

<sup>8</sup> No every Sunni cleric in Saudi Arabia has called for Jihad in Syria based on sectarian narrative. Salaman al-Ouda, for example, a prominent Saudi cleric, has advised against travelling to Syria, but to support the rebels with money leaving ‘the Syrian issue for the Syrians’.

people. His statement is a clear return to the fold of Saudi clerics, who were right from the beginning about this dreadful sectarian party' (Al-Sharq al-Awsat 2013).

Saudi media has been plagued with a discourse that case blame on the al-Assad regime and its allies for sectarian massacres and targeting Sunnis while downplaying the extremism of Sunni groups in the region, the Saudis unleashed an anti-shiite sentiment in the Kingdom and across the Arab world. This anti-shiite sentiment aggravated the sectarian tones and was quickly embraced by many Saudi clerics, not necessarily affiliated with the government, who called for 'Jihad' in Syria. The public internalized this sectarian discourse not only in the domestic realm but also across the region. At the domestic level, Sunni-Shiite tensions increased significantly, especially in the Eastern Province (Warrick 2013; Wehrey 2013; Dickinson 2013). In addition, this anti-Shiite discourse transcended the borders of the Kingdom to encompass other Gulf countries. For example, it had visible effects on relations between Sunni and Shiite residents in Kuwait (Dickinson 2013, 17–18). The sectarian discourse even reached countries with Sunni majorities. Anti-Shiite sentiment became visible in bigoted banners in Egypt (Saleh and Kraetzschmar 2015; Abdo 2013b) and in inter-communal violence such as the burning of Shiite residences in southern Jordan (Lynch 2013, 10).

Just as the Syria crisis was hardly sectarian at the beginning, the motives driving the initial Saudi involvement in the conflict on the side of the opposition side were far from sectarian. By casting the Shiite Other as an existential threat to Sunni communities, the Saudi Kingdom allowed a discourse that constructed security issues around sectarian identities. The audience's internalisation of this discourse made this securitisation process successful in granting legitimacy to and gaining support for Saudi intervention in the Syria crisis. Furthermore, it led to significant charity donations beyond official channels in support of the Syrian rebels. The securitisation of sectarianism and its internalisation by the public goes beyond elites capabilities of controlling it, which makes any effort of de-securitisation defiant. During later stages in the conflict, the Saudi Kingdom shifted its alliances from supporting Sunni rebels to more secular ones. Becoming aware of the rise of extremism, the Kingdom also attempted to control the jihadis and charity money flowing to Syria. On 14 March 2014, the Kingdom issued a decree prohibiting the call for jihadis in Syria. Nevertheless, the securitization of faith led 53 Saudi

clerics in 2015 to issue a statement calling for Jihad to support the radical Islamic groups in Syria against Russia, the Syrian regime, and Iran. The statement claimed that ‘The Western-Russian coalition with the Safavids [Iran] and the Nusairis [Alawites] are making a real war against the Sunni people and their countries’ (Al-Arabiya 2015). This development shows that even though the Saudi elites initiated the securitisation of sectarianism through media discourses, they were unable to control its impact and repercussions as it became internalised by the public.

## **5. Hezbollah**

Despite the so-called 2012 ‘dissociation’ policy or Baabda declaration which the Lebanese state adopted vis-à-vis Syria’s armed conflict, Hezbollah has led several battles on Syrian territory to defend the al-Assad regime. At the outset of Syria’s armed conflict, Hezbollah maintained secrecy about the scope of its military involvement. It was only on 30 April 2013 that it openly acknowledged its military role. Subsequently, it declared on various occasions its intent to support the regime as long as existential threats persist (International Crisis Group 2014). Since then, Hezbollah has led a major ground offensive in Qusayr, a Sunni province, and the battle in Qalamun, a strategic conduit for rebel forces (M. Sullivan 2014). Moreover, Hezbollah has engaged in various support missions in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.

Through the use of sectarian discourses and practices, Hezbollah has succeeded in transforming its involvement in Syria’s military conflict into a security response to an imminent existential threat. In this section, we first outline the triggers underlying Hezbollah’s military engagement. We then show how Hezbollah has capitalized on pro-Shiite allegiances and designated the rise of radicalized forms of Sunni Islamism as an existential threat to Lebanon. To ensure consistency with its previous trajectory, Hezbollah has linked the survival of the Syrian regime and the eradication of the radical Sunni threat to the notion of resistance against Israel and the imperial powers. The party’s framing of these threats has been used to justify its recourse to military activities, its bypassing of the politics of power-sharing in Lebanon, and its extension of the party’s military role beyond the immediate Israeli threat. Notwithstanding domestic divergences over Hezbollah’s role in Syria, a significant audience has internalized Hezbollah’s claims and has thus lent the party’s involvement and discourse some degree of authority.



Syria's armed conflict and the potential rearrangement of regional realignments triggered Hezbollah's securitisation move, which saw its military role shifting from that of anti-Israeli resistance to that of a stakeholder in Syria's conflict. The potential fall of the al-Assad regime constitutes a major threat to the long-standing alliance between Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran (Black 2013), and Syria represents both a hinterland and a passageway for Hezbollah's weapons. Through Syria, Hezbollah ensures its access to Iran's financial and military assistance. In addition, Hezbollah's securitisation move has been inextricably linked to Lebanon's domestic politics, which turn on sectarian affiliations and external alliances. Divisions within Lebanon over Syria's armed conflict have been associated with perceived shifts in power in a deeply divided polity that is significantly affected by regional geopolitics. Hezbollah has emerged in recent years as a pivotal player that has been able to acquire a great deal of autonomy within the Lebanese state (Early 2006; Peri 2014b). For decades, the party has sought to remedy Shiite insecurities in a political system formerly dominated by a Sunni–Maronite alliance. The al-Assad regime has been Hezbollah's strategic political ally ever since the party reconstituted itself from a militia force fighting Israel to a political party (Usher 1997). Not surprisingly, Hezbollah does not wish to forsake these gains.

Hezbollah's securitisation move can be seen as an attempt to frame the party's involvement in Syria as being related to an existential security issue. The Party of God has used the discourse of security to prevent the fall of the Assad regime. Key speech acts underpinning the securitising move have revolved around protecting the Shiite constituency in Syria and casting the rise of radical Sunni Islamism as a threat to Lebanon. More importantly, Hezbollah has framed the existential threats evolving from the armed conflict in Syria and the resistance against Israel as inextricably related. To garner support for its military involvement in the conflict, Hezbollah has referred to its duty to protect Lebanese Shiite communities residing in Syria (Barnard and Mourtada 2013). Furthermore, it has linked its involvement to the protection of important Shiite religious sites – namely, the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine (Black and Roberts 2013). Since 2013, its involvement has taken on a more decisive albeit contested dimension, capitalising on pro-Shiite sentiments (Birke 2013). Addressing critiques decrying the party's role in the Syria crisis, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has deployed stronger pro-Shiite rhetoric, calling on his constituency 'not to bend in the face of rising anti-Shiite sentiment'

(Barnard 2013). From this perspective, the Party of God claims to be fending off threats arising from radical Islamists – namely, al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS) – whom it dubs Takfiris. In key televised statements, Nasrallah has presented the rise of Sunni jihadism as an ‘unprecedented danger in history’ (Nasrallah’s Speech 2013) and declared a pre-emptive war against all Takfiris (International Crisis Group 2014). Hezbollah has thus depicted its intervention as an act that protects Lebanon from ‘terrorist groups’. It has, moreover, argued that clearing the Qalamun area of rebel forces has reduced security threats in the small republic (France-Presse 2014). Hezbollah has also directed attention to states’ unpreparedness in the context of regional turmoil: ‘What has the Lebanese state done in order to be prepared to face what happens in the region?’ (Naharnet 2013). As a Hezbollah official has stressed, there is no guarantee that the Lebanese army, which split in 1976 in light of the Lebanese Civil War, would not split again in the context of Sunni radicalisation.<sup>9</sup>

Hezbollah’s discourse also combines the politics of Takfiri containment, the survival of the Assad regime, and the ‘resistance’ narrative. As Nasrallah has declared, ‘Syria is the resistance’s main supporter, and the resistance cannot stand still and let them [the Takfiris] break its backbone’ (quoted in Hashem 2013). The party defends the Assad regime as the vanguard of Palestine and the resistance (Berti 2013). It further depicts the fall of al-Assad as an occurrence that would benefit Israel and harm the Palestinian cause. This discursive logic confers an explicit security dimension to its involvement in Syria, one that justifies Hezbollah’s departure from its usual military trajectory within Southern Lebanon and necessitates emergency action beyond the extant Israeli threat. In this view, Hezbollah’s anti-Takfiri ‘speech act’ is neither a decontextualized ‘utterance’ nor does it constitute a radical shift from Hezbollah’s trajectory. By linking the anti-Takfiri threat with the survival of the Syrian regime and consequently the survival of the ‘resistance’, the speech act embeds itself within Hezbollah’s repertoire, and ‘grafts’ itself onto the external context in which the politics of securitisation takes place.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Beirut, December 2014.

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of speech acts as “discursive techniques” embedded within socio-political contexts and circumstances, see Balzacq (2005, 172).

The party's speech acts and its framing of threats cannot, furthermore, be analysed on their own. We must consider the counter-narratives in response to which Hezbollah (re)articulates its claims. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has triggered divisions between Lebanon's contending blocs: the March 14 and the March 8 alliances. At the heart of this controversy lies Hezbollah's disproportionate military power as a non-state actor. Since the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, two contending blocs have taken divergent stances on Lebanon's role in regional politics. Led by the Sunni-based Future Movement, the anti-Syrian or March 14 coalition has close ties with the West and Saudi Arabia. It considers Hezbollah's weaponry as eroding the Lebanese state's sovereignty. Since the outbreak of Syria's armed conflict, the anti-Syrian alliance has called for the upholding of a policy of disengagement and has slammed Hezbollah's entanglement in neighbouring Syria. In contrast, the pro-Syrian or March 8 coalition, which is led by the Party of God, has close ties to the Assad regime. This group defends Hezbollah's arsenal and the 'army, people, resistance' formula as strategic imperatives. Although the March 14 Alliance has emerged as the winning parliamentary coalition since 2005, Hezbollah has acquired substantial political weight, which has allowed it, together with its March 8 allies, to veto decisions detrimental to its interests. In the context of this internal struggle, Hezbollah has had to rebut accusations that its intervention has dragged Lebanon into the conflict and spurred anti-Shiite retaliatory attacks in the small republic (M. Sullivan 2014, 25). Groups belonging to the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance – such as the Christian parties Kata'ib and the Lebanese Forces – insist that Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has increased Lebanon's vulnerability to threats. In response, Hezbollah officials have accused them of providing a cover for 'extremist forces' by contesting the party's involvement (Al Alam News 2014). In reaction to the Future Current's critique of Hezbollah's military role, Hezbollah has combined its framing of threats with the politics of fear, warning the mainstream Sunni movement that they could be the next targets of the Takfiris (L'Orient Le Jour 2015).

Hezbollah's framing of threats forms the cornerstone of its recourse to special politics. By transforming the threat of Sunni extremism into a primary security item, Hezbollah has elevated its involvement in Syria above the power-sharing provisions in Lebanon. More specifically, it has elevated the security issue above the concept of traditional state sovereignty and domestic consensus. Hezbollah has, for instance, used its veto powers to contest domestic

deliberations or measures that probe or seek to contain its involvement in Syria. In 2013, President Michel Sleiman called for the restraining of Hezbollah's unilateral military capacity and the integration of its military wing into the Lebanese army. In response, Hezbollah boycotted the new round of the National Dialogue and declared its arsenal a non-negotiable. Again in 2014, despite calls to uphold the 2012 Baabda declaration as the cornerstone of the new Tammam Salam cabinet, Hezbollah refused the inclusion of any statement in the ministerial declaration that would contest its arsenal. While highlighting the centrality of the 'army, people, resistance' formula, it expressed scepticism regarding the Baabda declaration in light of the threat posed by the Sunni radicals (Abou Zeid 2014; Dakroub 2013). Through its involvement in Syria, Hezbollah has prioritized its military role at the expense of its status as a political party in Lebanon's power-sharing system. While preparing for the Qalamun battle in 2015, for example, it declared its intent to temporarily sideline internal affairs (Naharnet 2015).

While Hezbollah makes a sharp distinction between Sunnis and Takfiris (Moughnieh 2013), its politics of Takfiri containment and its recourse to military activities in Syria have stirred up animosities between Lebanon's Sunni and Shiite communities (Knutsen 2014). The Sunni communities view Hezbollah's coercive capacity as a threat to their own power (International Crisis Group 2014). Some Lebanese Salafi clerics have called for Sunnis to join the rebels and fight against Hezbollah in Syria (Al Arabiya 2013). Hezbollah has even seen its military involvement in Syria contested within its own constituency (Dettmer 2013; Matthiesen 2013a).

Nevertheless, Hezbollah's threat framing has gained the attention of a wider audience and has achieved recognition. The party's designation of the rise of Sunni jihadis as an existential threat that requires emergency action has undoubtedly garnered public support (Blanford 2013). The Lebanese have been highly receptive to the its declaration of Sunni Islamists as a primary security issue. A recent Pew Research Center Survey, for instance, shows that more than 84 per cent of Lebanese people are extremely concerned about ISIS, and that this fear is equally high among Muslims and Christians (Carle 2015). Still, it is Hezbollah's authoritative position within Lebanon's political setting that determines its capacity to build an audience. Although Lebanese Sunni groups have sent troops to fight with the rebels, Hezbollah's narratives and actions have

received more validation. As a securitiser, Hezbollah has since the 1990s acquired the ability to make effectual claims within Lebanon and beyond (Peri 2014a; Early 2006). Its credibility is underpinned by its participation in power-sharing politics and its provision of social welfare services (Worrall 2013). Moreover, its victory against Israel in 2006 has conferred on the party not only a domestic but also a regional aura of credibility. Another element that enhances the party's leverage is the lack of 'viable alternatives' within Lebanon's political spectrum (Lobs 2014, 6). Seen in this light, Hezbollah's demands shore up support partly because the party's detractors have a poor governance record.<sup>11</sup> Lebanon's deficient state power and its compliance with Hezbollah's superiority (Early 2006, 124) are key components that have boosted the credibility of Hezbollah's speech acts within Lebanese circles. The strengthening of Sunni jihadis in Syria and Iraq, as well as their recent advances in the northern parts of Lebanon – namely, the province of Aarsal – have lent resonance to Hezbollah's framing of the existent threats. As Hezbollah's leader has claimed, the 'Lebanese state still needs to prove' that it can protect Lebanon from the threat posed by Sunni jihadis (Nasrallah's Speech 2013).

## **6. Conclusions: Lessons on Securitisation in the Middle East and Beyond**

This article has examined the sectarian dynamics within the international relations surrounding the Syria crisis through the lens of securitisation theory. We have examined the speech acts and practices underpinning Saudi Arabia's and Hezbollah's intervention in the conflict. When political actors deliberately construct sectarian identities as securitised issues, these discourses become inextricably linked to a dichotomized demarcation between the Self and the Other. Such a demarcation then becomes inherently tied to a particular conflict.

This framework of analysis makes an important contribution to the existing literature at the nexus of sectarian identities and political violence in the Middle East. More precisely, a serious engagement with securitisation theory illuminates how sectarianism plays out in conflicts. Securitisation could help to unravel the mechanisms leading to the entrenchment and diffusion of sectarianism as a meta-narrative in the post-2011 order in the Middle East. Engaging

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<sup>11</sup> Informal communications with Lebanese scholars, Beirut, 2014.

with securitisation theory requires us to consider why actors seek to securitise identities. It also allows us to delineate the argumentative power, mechanisms, and processes through which identities are transformed into security issues. In accordance with this viewpoint, our findings counter the assumption that sectarianism is an ‘inescapable’ characteristic of some societies. Rather, we find that it can be a domestic and/or regional dynamic that ‘waxes and wanes’ in accordance with deliberate political actions and situational contexts. This framework could also inform the analysis of other cases in the region, such as the securitisation of the Sunni–Shiite divide in Bahrain and Yemen. Moreover, it could be transposed to examine intra-communal rifts within the Sunni community (e.g. Salafis versus the Muslim Brotherhood). Further, it could provide a theoretical entry point for studying the political struggle in Egypt and the portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat to the survival of the state and the stability of the region (cf. Malak 2014).

As securitisation is contributing to the scholarly debate on sectarianism in the international relations of the Middle East, empirical insights from the region are also contributing to the development of securitisation theory beyond its initially Western scope. The theory of securitisation was initially presented as a universal tool for the analysis of contemporary security processes. Its formulation and application remained confined to the security dynamics of Western and European historical experience, and many scholars considered it to be applicable only to liberal contexts. Despite the theory’s European focus, some scholars have argued that insights from the Copenhagen School could be applied to non-democratic contexts through concept travelling, which implies adapting concepts without distorting their original meaning (Wilkinson 2007; Vuori 2008; Sheikh 2014; Malmvig 2014; Greenwood and Wæver 2013; Yilmaz and Bilgin 2005). Based on this view, this article has shown that the Middle East provides a rich pool of evidence with which to contribute to the development of securitisation theory and its applicability to non-European and non-democratic contexts. In particular, the securitisation of sectarianism in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah highlights three potential areas for future theory development.

First, securitisation theory focuses on cases where an issue is taken out of the ‘normal politics’ sphere, where democratic rules govern, and is transformed into ‘special politics’, where

leaders can bypass democratic constraints through ‘extraordinary measures’. The cases of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia show that the narrow interpretation of ‘extraordinary measures’ poses a challenge. If ‘extraordinary measures’ in a democratic context are clear – for instance, the bypassing of normal decision-making process – the ‘extraordinary’ in non- or less-democratic contexts is still unclear. Some might argue that applying securitisation to non-democratic contexts might be difficult because such contexts are constantly governed by ‘special politics’; the regimes do not need legitimacy, which is substituted for by coercive mechanisms. Hence, it becomes difficult to discern ‘normal’ from ‘special politics’. Nevertheless, scholars have found that authoritarian regimes do care about legitimacy, because pure coercion does not exist and leaders require a minimum degree of consent and persuasive power (Alagappa 1995; Geddes 2005). Our two empirical cases reveal that ‘normal politics’ in non- or less-democratic contexts are not related to democratic procedures, but rather to the social and historical structures within each society that impose constraints on political leaders. For instance, Hezbollah’s special politics have focused on bypassing the power-sharing tradition in Lebanon. From this perspective, the challenging of such established structures can be considered ‘special politics’.

Second, the role of the audience in the securitisation process remains both theoretically and empirically under-researched (Leonard and Kaunert 2011). In a securitisation process, two actors are central: the securitiser (i.e. the actor who frames the issue as an existential threat) and the audience (i.e. the collective group to which the process of securitisation is directed). Accordingly, securitisation is a shared understanding of what constitutes an existential threat. Nevertheless, how this shared understanding is achieved remains unclear. Seen through its initial Western lens, securitisation theory implicitly assumes that audience acceptance is achieved through debate and free discussion. The cases investigated here show that audience approval can be achieved through a series of alternative methods that need to be further unpacked. Audience approval can be achieved through media manipulation or through the ‘silence of the obedient’, as the case of Saudi Arabia suggests. It can also be achieved through the attainment by one actor of an authoritative position in societal debates, as the case of Hezbollah reveals.

Third, the conception of the state presented in securitisation theory involves a logic that is based on a certain understanding of the state and society. Such an understanding is inextricably

related to the history of state formation in Europe, or what Wilkinson (2007) terms the ‘Westphalian straitjacket’ of the Copenhagen School. According to this conception, societies are bound by the European understanding of identity, which is based on the nation state. National identity and citizenship overlap in this respect. From this perspective, Waever (1995, 67) distinguishes between threats to the society (nation) and those that endanger the state. Whereas the criterion for societal security is identity (national identity), state security is inextricably related to sovereignty. According to this understanding, society/nation is regarded as a whole, constituting one identity. The history of state formation in the Third World, and the Middle East in particular, has led to the emergence of states that are not necessarily congruent with national identities.<sup>12</sup> Middle Eastern states coexist alongside supranational identities, such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, and substate identities, such as tribal, ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities (Hinnebusch 2013). To adapt securitisation theory to such contexts, we need to broaden the investigation of security dynamics beyond the state, looking at the securitisation processes pursued by both regimes and domestic forces considered to be non-state actors, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Future research ought to explore how securitisation theory can be adapted to account for those cases in which identity spillovers operate at domestic-regional nexuses. Ultimately, the cases of Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah has examined the cases of securitisation of religious identities. Although Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia employed indirect and subtle sectarian narratives, the securitisation process was far reaching as people felt that their faith is under threat. Sectarianism in Middle East politics has the potential to contribute to the study of the securitisation religious dimensions beyond the Western tradition (Sheikh 2014).

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<sup>12</sup> For more details on the process of state formation in the Middle East, see Ayubi (1996) Owen (2004), Khoury and Kostiner (1990), and Choueiri (2002).



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